

Solving the Korean Conundrum: Russia's Interaction with Major Actors in the Trump-Moon Era*

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Russia seeing peace, stability and the denuclearization of the Korean Peninsula as priorities, will try to play the role of peacemaker and more or less neutral observer in a situation which has shifted due to the new leadership in Seoul and Washington. The authors argue that Russia should pay special attention the role of Moon Jae In. If he can implement a new policy, this could be a game-changer and Seoul could become the principal partner for Russia in solving the Korean conundrum. If the Trump administration would turn from pressure to diplomacy, possibilities for US-Russia cooperation could increase. Russia would mostly support Chinese positions but keep its own line. Understanding such tactics in this strategic triangle is the key to understanding Moscow's efforts regarding the Korean problem, including multilateral aspects. At the same time, Russia cannot ignore North Korea being one of the few neighboring countries maintaining good relations with Pyongyang.

The authors suggest the options for a start of a diplomatic process between the two Koreas and between North Korea and the U.S., as well as in multilateral format and analyze the role Russia might play.

Keywords: Korean Issue, Russia and Korea, Trump's Korean Policy, North Korea's Nuclear and Missile Program, New ROK Government Foreign Policy

Factors for Russia's Strategy in Korean Affairs

The Korean Peninsular situation gained new dynamism since the start of 2017, determined mostly by two new factors: U.S. President Trump's new robust attitude towards the North Korean nuclear prob-

lem, which he made clear he may try to solve by force, and his anti-North Korean actions, on the one hand, and the start of a new Northern policy by the Moon Jae In's administration, on the other. Both leaders have suggested new conceptual approaches towards this long-standing issue. While the new U.S. administration noted that "strategic patience is over," Moon Jae In, although critical about the North Korean nuclear and missile programs, wants to improve relations with the North and restore dialogue and cooperation. This is an obvious rift between the allies' ideological approaches — engagement versus pressure and it was recognized at an early stage by both sides.¹

Other interested parties also have to adapt their policies to the new reality, especially given the increased volatility and unpredictability of the situation on the Korean Peninsula, as well as the increased possibility of a conflict, either by pushing the situation to the extreme or just a miscalculation. At the same time, the probability of a dialogue — and maybe a speedy one — as an *alternative strategy* to solve the Korean problem- in fact is rising. Paradoxically, pressure and engagement are not independent of one another. However, the trigger for twists and turns between the two might be beyond control of the interested parties, other than North Korean and the USA, who can use them arbitrarily.

This is a new challenge to Russian policymakers. The experts' opinions on the possible course of action do not vary much: Russia should follow an independent line aimed at a negotiated solution by political and diplomatic means. The theme of regional security in North-East Asia, including the nuclear problem of North Korea and its implications for Russia have been explored in the works of many Russian authors, including Ilya Dyachkov, ("Nuclear Issue in 2016: Challenges and Prospects,"² Alexander Zhebin ("Russia and Korean Unifi-

1. "Trump to New South Korean Leader: Conditions Must Be Right for Talks with North-NBC," *New York Times*, May 12, 2017, URL. <<https://www.nytimes.com/reuters/2017/05/12/world/asia/12reuters-southkorea-usa-trump.html?smid=fb-share>>(date accessed June 10, 2017).

2. Dyachkov, Ilya "Nuclear Issue in 2016: Challenges and Prospects" 2016 *International Academic Seminar on Korean Unification*. – Seoul, 2016. – pp. 19-27.

cation,"³ Konstantin Asmolov, Alexander Vorontsov ("Russia Approach towards the Peace Preservation Problem on Korean Peninsula,"⁴ collective monograph "The Uneasy Neighborhood: Korean Peninsula Problems and Challenges for Russia,"⁵ the collective monograph "Asian Neighbors of Russia: Cooperation in a Regional Context,"⁶ etc. Also there have been a number of works by U.S. and Korean authors, including Kim Jaebum ("The North Korean Factor in East Asian Regional Security,"⁷ Joo, Seung-Ho ("Russia's Policy on Nuclear Proliferation and National Unification on the Korean Peninsula,"⁸ Kim, Sung-Han ("The Day After: ROK-U.S. Cooperation for Korean Unification,"⁹ Ko Jae Nam (The rising role of Russia in settling a peace on the Korean Peninsula),¹⁰ etc.

Despite the fact that the role of Russia and other regional actors in the denuclearization and unification of Korea is relatively well explored, there are new factors, mentioned above, which require the reevaluation of the prospects for the denuclearization and unification of the Korean Peninsula as well as a reassessment of Russia's role in

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3. Zhebin, Alexander, «Russia and Korean Unification» *Asian Perspective* Vol. 19, No. 2, Special Issue on Security and Cooperation in Northeast Asia (Fall-Winter 1995), pp. 175-190.
 4. Vorontsov, Alexander «Russia Approach towards the Peace Preservation Problem on Korean Peninsula» // *Proceedings of the International Conference «The Korean War and Search for Ways of Peace Maintenance on Korean Peninsula in XXI Century.»* Seoul, 2000. pp. 1-24.
 5. "The Uneasy Neighborhood: Korean Peninsula Problems and Challenges for Russia," edited by G. Toloraya (Moscow: MGIMO, 2015), 344 p.
 6. *Asian Neighbors of Russia: Cooperation in a Regional Context* (Moscow, Dashkov&Co editors, 2016), 199 p.
 7. Jaebum Kim The North Korean Factor in East Asian Regional Security, *Journal of Global Policy and Governance*, November 2013, Volume 2, Issue 2, pp. 181-191
 8. Seung-Ho Joo Russia's Policy on Nuclear Proliferation and National Unification on the Korean Peninsula, *Pacific Focus* Volume 29, Issue 2 August 2014, pp. 167-187.
 9. Kim Sung-han The Day After: ROK-U.S. Cooperation for Korean Unification, *The Washington Quarterly*, Volume 38, 2015 - Issue 3.
 10. Ko Jae Nam The rising role of Russia in settling a peace on the Korean Peninsula, *East Asian review* Vol:11 Iss:2 Pg:41-62, 1999.

this process.

Russia, given its increased attention to Asia and the Pacific in the framework of its “Turn to the East” and “Eurasia Grand Partnership” policies, would like to control the developments near its eastern border more directly, but has only a limited capacity to do so. The ability to do so will greatly depend on Russia’s relations with major players - the USA, China, and the ROK.

Moscow’s relations with the USA are far from being certain, including the Asia and the Pacific angle. President Trump’s policy on the Korean issue is yet to be determined. So far, the U.S. policy can be characterized as repetition of the past, rather than looking for innovative approaches. Generally speaking, competition with the U.S. in the Pacific is more probable than cooperation. However, any chances for improved U.S.-Russia interaction on the Korean issue should not be lost and a priori discarded as “unrealistic.”

At the same time, the “Turn to the East” policy, so far mostly concentrated on China, needs a new impulse.¹¹ Thus, both interaction with China and direct discussions with North and South Korea are of growing importance. The new ROK government might become a more important partner for Russia than the previous ones were in the last decade, as the views and approaches of Moon Jae In’s administration are more acceptable to Russia than the negativism of conservative governments. Despite the new situation, Russia will still remain a stakeholder in Korean unification and security issues — generally considered to hold fourth place after the United States, China, and Japan (curiously, that was the order in which heads of states congratulated Moon on election by telephone). The increase in tensions in Korea automatically raises the rating of the Korean issue in Russian foreign policy.

The importance of the Korean issue in Russia’s politics thus has the potential to grow as it can be characterized as a combination of global and regional security and economic interests. The first includes non-proliferation and prevention of a possible large-scale conflict at its

11. Lukin, Alexander. *Turn to Asia*, Moscow, “Ves Mir” publishers, 2014, pp. 509-510.

borders that could change the whole of geopolitical balance in Asia; the second is related to possible benefits from a reduction of tensions in Korea and expanding economic cooperation in East Asia.

The multilateral diplomatic dimension is also of importance, as the Korean issue is the most acute for Russia in Asia and the Pacific and one of the few where Russia is involved in multilateral diplomatic processes with participation of other global power centers. It might be true that Russia's influence in Korean affairs is limited, however it can still be used to help bring about qualitative changes in the Korean game. Stratfor experts recently observed, "Though Russia alone cannot solve the North Korean problem, it could move the dial just enough to either play spoiler or ally to any efforts by the West to solve it."¹²

The fact, that the "Grand Eurasian Partnership" was declared a strategic choice for Russia in its advance to Asia¹³ makes the Northeast Asian region a clue for a much wider long-term strategy. Speaking at the OBOR summit in Beijing in May 2017, President Putin named "summing-up of potentials of the Eurasian Economic Union, SCO, and ASEAN"¹⁴ as the basis for the Eurasian grand partnership. Russian involvement in the Chinese "OBOR" (B&R) initiative,¹⁵ which some observers consider no less than a "China-led anti-Western coalition"¹⁶ means that attention to East Asia in Russian policy should grow. North Korea, with its weak transportation infrastructure and political risks, is

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12. "Russia Seizes an Opportunity in North Korea" *Stratfor*, May 5, 2017, <https://worldview.stratfor.com/article/russia-seizes-opportunity-north-korea> (date accessed June 10, 2017).
 13. Russia and China to initiate comprehensive Eurasian economic partnership *Expert Online*, June 30, 2016, URL. <http://expert.ru/2016/06/30/rf-i-kr-initsiuruyut-vseob_emlyuschee-evrazijskoe-ekonomicheskoe-partnerstvo>(date accessed June 10, 2017).
 14. "International forum: One belt, one road," Kremlin.ru, May 14, 2017, URL. <<http://kremlin.ru/events/president/news/54491>>(date accessed June 10, 2017).
 15. "One Belt One Road Summit 2017 Beijing," Expo-Asia, URL. <<https://expo-asia.ru/exhibitions/beltroadsummit2017bj>>(date accessed June 10, 2017).
 16. Nanukov, Sergei «Everyone wants to be a friend of China,» *Expert Online*, May 17, 2017, URL. <<http://expert.ru/2017/04/21/novaya-antizapadnaya-koalitsiya-kitaya/>>(date accessed June 10, 2017).

also a sort of a “locked door” into Asia for Russia, which is limiting Russia’s ability to communicate with other Asian countries, notably South Korea. Recently the reasons for Russia to pay more attention to the Korean situation, despite its preoccupation with Middle East, Ukraine, and other “hot spots” have risen.

First, the threat to the non-proliferation regime has increased as North Korea has increased the tempo of bolstering its nuclear potential. The existing nuclear strategic balance is the cornerstone of Russia’s strategic positions in the world and its possible rupture as a result of North Korean actions and eventual appearance of new nuclear states would undermine the basis for Russia’s global power and security. Therefore, Russia is seriously interested in curbing the North Korean nuclear program.

The second is militarization of the neighboring region. The appearance of new U.S. “strategic assets” (especially missile defense systems like THAAD, eventually capable to undermine Russia’s missile deterrent in the East) and troops is a military concern for Russia. It could lead to the militarization of North Eastern China, the re-militarization of Japan, and eventual arms race embracing all the regional countries. Russia will have to spend a great deal of money and effort beefing up the defense potential of its scarcely-populated Far East.

A new additional factor of concern could be a possible acquisition by North Korea of the capability to deliver “a second strike” (the ability to strike the enemy, notably the U.S., even after much of the country’s potential would be devastated by the enemy’s “kinetic action”). This would enable North Korea, critics say, to deter U.S. involvement into a possible conflict in Korea, even if it was started by North Korea itself, thus paving the way for possible North Korean aggression to take over the South. Another possibility is using this new capability as a blackmail tool against the South and the U.S. to extol a “fee for security.” This might signify a completely new strategic situation as Russia’s policy in the Korean Peninsula is based on the presumption that North Korea’s WMD efforts are aimed at deterring their enemies to sustain the state and thus North Korea has no reason to unleash a war. Should North Korea gain the capability to attack the South without

being deterred by the USA that could mean a whole new equation and change in regional strategy. Russia certainly does not want the Pyongyang regime to become capable of aggressive behavior, let alone unleash a conflict as, unlike in its Soviet past, Russia has no leverage to control Pyongyang.

To understand Russia's motivation it is useful to mention some well-known, yet relevant permanent strategic goals of Russia with respect to the Korean Peninsula. Then it will become clear how and in what direction Moscow can cooperate with global and regional stakeholders taking into consideration the novations of the Trump-Moon era. Moscow needs stability in Korea to create conditions for Russia's own deeper integration into the regional and international division of labor and Asian economic development.

- Russia wishes the Korean Peninsula to be free of all weapons of mass destruction (WMD), although not all means — especially military options — are considered permissible to achieve that goal.
- Russia would not formally recognize the DPRK as a nuclear state. However, it cannot ignore the nuclear weapons potential of its neighboring country.
- The goal is that North Korea should obey the NPT rules and return to the IAEA. Verification and guarantees of denuclearization should be based on international law and, in that case, Russia would support the development of a peaceful nuclear program of the DPRK.
- Missile development and space research would be permissible in accordance with the established international regimes and only under the condition that the DPRK does not use missile technology to upset the power balance and cause an arms race and increase in tensions.
- The final solution to the Korean issue should be found within by multiparty diplomatic processes and the idea of a “package solution,” first suggested by Moscow in 2003,¹⁷ is strikingly similar to the agreements reached by the six-party talks in 2005-2007, and should become the basis for it.
- The security of the DPRK is a precondition for achieving the goals of non-proliferation, demilitarization and stability. However, blackmail tactics employed by Pyongyang are becoming increasingly dangerous.

17. Press-statement of Russian Foreign Ministry Spokesman, N46 of 12.01.2003.

- The international process, comprising major powers here, should not be seen as a “zero-sum game,” but unfortunately with the growth of Russia-U.S. contradictions and China-U.S. frictions leads to a regional Cold War era-like division on Korean affairs (3+3) is taking root. “A concert of powers” in North East Asia seems more remote than ever.
- Russia supports North-South reconciliation and cooperation without outside interference and aimed at the distant goal of eventual Korean reunification in a form agreed upon by both the North and South.
- A unified Korea dependent on a foreign country, be it the USA or China, would be detrimental to Russian interests and Russia would strive to prevent such a development. An “absorption” of the North by a pro-American South Korea could be harmful to both the Korean nation and regional security, and Russia would probably join China in opposing such a scenario. Neither is a China-dominated North Korea desirable, as such a regime would be probably be unstable and such a development would cause “containment” efforts aimed at China by the USA, Japan, and possibly other players and increase military tensions in the area.
- That means that Russia should consider the preservation of statehood of North Korea as an option, desirable in comparison with the collapse of the state and turmoil in its neighborhood. However, this does not mean approval of the policies (both external and internal) of the regime.

Russia’s Relations with North Korea: Intensive Political Dialogue and Stagnation in the Economy

To play a constructive role in the Korean issue, Russia has to maintain both good relations with the DPRK and cooperation with other major players. Russian leverage on Korean affairs dwindled after the break-up of the Soviet Union - when the pro-South in Russia politicians were most influential. Russia learned the lesson the hard way that its influence and ability to defend its interests regarding the Korean issue are correlated with the degree of its influence on North Korea; otherwise Russia would be excluded from discussions on the Korean problem. Therefore, the North Korean factor was given attention since the 2000s.

Stratfor experts noted, “When Putin came to power in 2000, he saw the strategic value of maintaining good relations with North Korea — as well as ways Russia could manipulate its position in the region to pressure the country.”¹⁸

Following this logic, Russia chose to develop relations with Kim Jong Un from the very start of his rule, even as the regime strived to stabilize itself. The North Koreans were the ones who took the initiative in rapprochement with Russia – a decision, influenced by the cooling down of North Korea-China relations. As Chinese leader Xi Jinping started to have a Southern tilt, Pyongyang became openly defiant towards Beijing, criticizing a “certain country” [implying China] and after China joined the pressure on North Korea in 2017, becoming openly hostile to Chinese interference, thus having to diversify their foreign contacts in an attempt to find a possible alternative to close ties with Beijing. Although Pyongyang’s attempts to win Moscow’s favor by showing support on problems sensitive to Moscow, like Ukrainian and Syrian issues, did bring about some awkward feelings in Russia, it, nevertheless, tried to exploit the situation in order to restore its influence in North Korea, especially in the economic sphere.¹⁹

The rapprochement between Moscow and Pyongyang led to a flurry of bilateral visits in 2014–2015, mostly devoted to economic projects. Several high-profile political visits to Russia took place: Foreign Minister Ri Su Yong, “Second in command” Secretary Choe Ryong Hae, Vice Prime-Minister Ro Du Chol, and Minister of Defense Hyon

18. “Russia Seizes an Opportunity in North Korea,” URL. <<https://worldview.stratfor.com/article/russia-seizes-opportunity-north-korea>>(date accessed June 10, 2017).

19. “After Japan and the West levied sanctions on Russia for its involvement in the Ukraine conflict and its annexation of Crimea, Russia’s view of North Korea shifted. Russia began quietly laying the groundwork that would strengthen its ties to North Korea, thus increasing its global political leverage should it need it. Russia can never replace China’s influence over North Korea, but it could interfere with measures employed by China, the United States, or their allies to try to pressure Pyongyang,” write the experts of Stratfor “Russia Seizes an Opportunity in North Korea,” <<https://worldview.stratfor.com/article/russia-seizes-opportunity-north-korea>> (date accessed June 10, 2017).

Yong Chol (his purge is hardly related to his meetings in Russia, as they were rather symbolic), Choe Thae Bok, Chairman of the DPRK Supreme People's Assembly, etc. Russian Vice-Premier Yury Trutnev and Minister of Far East Development Alexander Galushka also visited Pyongyang.

In April 2015, the 7th Session of the Intergovernmental Commission took place in Pyongyang. A "Year of Friendship" saw many cultural and social events from April to October 2015. They included visits of sister cities delegations, numerous sport exchanges, film festivals, exchanges in the educational sphere, delegations of scientists (including that of social scientists from the DPRK, which is noteworthy), and an increase in tourism. Special "Weeks of Friendship" took place and more than a dozen treaties and agreements were signed.

Although the expected visit of Kim Jong-un to Russia for the World War II Victory Day in May 2015, did not materialize, which upset Russian Asia-related policymakers, the trend to work out the broad long-term basis of economic cooperation continued. Negotiations on different economic projects for government and business were of a scale unprecedented for the last three decades. Bilateral economic cooperation negotiations between Russia and North Korea have seemingly reached the same level as after the remarkable Kim Il-sung visit to the USSR in 1984.

A new cooperation concept was emerging with a very pragmatic basis: anything the North Koreans want they should pay for, and in advance. North Korea's most valuable resources are minerals and raw materials, and these have been at the center of most deals (like coal, non-ferrous metals, gold, rare earth as well as iron, etc.). Both countries have agreed to appoint "project commissioners" who would work to reduce red tape and streamline business interactions, acting as "unique points of contact" for strategic projects. For the first time, a Russia-North Korea business council was created to find solutions to the problems of visa issuance and develop better communications. Many bilateral agreements and framework memoranda of understanding were agreed upon, ranging from automobile transportation to sanitary control of agricultural products, from debt repayment and agreements

on settling accounts in rubles to new rules regarding North Korean workers. Sectoral meetings include several dozen tracks of government-to-government, business-to-government, and business-to-business negotiations.

The North Korean side suggested many barter operations given the lack of financial resources at its disposal, with interest by some Russian companies (like coal in exchange for pig iron, etc.). Many of the projects are based on the modernization of plants and facilities, created in cooperation with the former Soviet Union. The North Koreans were especially interested in getting a supply of energy from the Russian Far East and are ready to pay in copper from Onsan deposits. Russian companies expressed interest in revitalizing North Korea's hydro and coal-fired power plants and agreed to set up a special working group to study the issue of electricity supply to the Korean Peninsula, including an analysis of possible route supplies of fuel and energy balances of the participating countries and the cost of electricity. In addition, wind generators may be supplied to North Korea. Russian companies are interested in acquiring magnesite and developing mineral deposits while Russian geologists agreed to conduct a survey of mineral resources in the DPRK, based on materials that were accumulated during decades of Russia-DPRK cooperation. North Korea demonstrated interest in exporting agricultural and fishery products and Russian investment in the Wonsan-Kumgansan tourist zone.²⁰ Then came 2016. The consecutive nuclear tests in January and September and numerous missile tests caused irritation and concern in Russia and the language of official statements became increasingly rigid, from citing "grave violations of international law and UNSC resolutions" in January 2016²¹ to "explicit disregard for the norms of international law"

20. "Kim Jong Un's visit to Moscow is off, Russian official says," *CNN.com*, April 30, 2015, URL. <<http://edition.cnn.com/2015/04/30/world/russia-kim-jong-un-visit>>(date accessed June 10, 2017).

21. "Russian foreign ministry commented on reports of hydrogen bomb test in DPRK," *Polit.ru*, January 6, 2016, URL. <<http://polit.ru/news/2016/01/06/zakharova/>> (date accessed June 10, 2017).

and “serious threat to peace and security” in September 2016.²²

Russia joined the UNSC sanctions against North Korea, having agreed (although with reservations) to Resolutions 2270 and 2321 and 2356. However, Russia is not very satisfied with the motivations of the sanctions — for example, concerning missile launches, Russia states that both North Korea and South Korea have the right to fire missiles when conducting military drills.²³ Generally, sanctions (to which Russia reluctantly joined taking into consideration the will of the international community) are viewed not as the end in itself (and should not damage North Korea’s population and development interests), but rather as one of the tools intended to address the nuclear problem with negotiations being the only way to find an ultimate solution.

Nevertheless, sanctions totally undermined most of the agreements reached on economic projects, although Russia insisted that the prohibitions are subject to application only if there are “reasonable grounds” to believe that the money will be spent on the nuclear program.”²⁴ Also, Russia’s disagreement with national-level unilateral

22. Press-statement of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Russian Federation of September 9, 2016, URL. <http://www.mid.ru/ru/foreign_policy/news/-asset_publisher/cKNonkJE02Bw/content/id/2427373>(date accessed June 10, 2017).

23. “Russia Prepares New North Korea Sanctions,” the Moscow Times, February, 21, 2017, URL. <<https://themoscowtimes.com/news/russia-prepares-new-north-korea-sanctions-57219>>(date accessed June 10, 2017).

24. On 27, December 2016 President Putin signed the executive order pursuant to UNSC Resolution 2270, which is speedy by Russian government standards). For Russia, the prohibition of the import of gold, iron, and titanium ore, and limitations on financial transactions were harmful — along with closing of subsidiary organizations, branches and representative offices of North Korean banks, joint ventures with the participation of North Korean banks, (however many of them are “fictional entities”) and the prohibition of equity participation in the ownership or correspondent relations with North Korean banks that meant a virtual standstill in cooperation. However, the transit of Russian coal via the North Korean port of Rajin was affected (as a last-minute exception in a deal with the UNSC). Also the number of North Koreans working in Russia did not decrease. The ban imposed on the imports of North Korean raw materials to Russia cannot be considered a significant measure now, as the quantities are insignificant. Pursuant to UNSC Resolution 2321 a new Presidential executive order was prepared, which limits the scientific and technological cooperation (excluding the

and secondary sanctions did not matter much as the U.S. government started to sanction Russian companies for cooperation with North Korea, even if it was not related to WMD programs.²⁵

Official statistics put Russia-DPRK trade below \$100 million per year. Since in October 2014 the two countries agreed on settling the accounts in rubles, without the involvement of U.S. banks or U.S. dollars, business transactions with settlement in rubles were on the rise. However, the above figures do not include shipments via third countries, which are sometimes quite significant. Russia officials estimated at the peak of cooperation that Russian exports to North Korea through China alone amount to US \$900 mln a year.²⁶ The authors estimate current turnover (mostly Russia exports) to drop to less than \$500 mln due to restrictions. Russia mostly supplies oil and fuels, chemicals, and raw materials and the possibility of purchasing something from North Korea has shrunk due to sanctions and especially the ban on financial transactions. Although some Russian financial institutions are permitted to carry on some of operations the trade mostly turned to cash basis or barter.

One of the few active projects now is the Khasan-Rajin transit railway serviced by a Russia-North Korean joint venture “Rasonconfrance.” It mostly transports coal from Russia for delivery by ship thorough Rajin port terminal to Asia; in 2017 the cargoes were on the rise exceeding 1 mln tons in the first half of the year while the volume was

medical area) unless approved by the UNSC, bans imports of copper, nickel, silver, and zinc (although coal and iron ore deliveries are possible from the entities, as they are not involved with the nuclear program), requires the deportation of financial representatives DPRK in Russia. “Russian MOFA prepared a draft on sanctions against Pyongyang,” *RBK.ru*, February 21, 2017, URL. <<http://www.rbc.ru/rbcfreenews/58abcf129a7947f07e13d64a>>(date accessed June 10, 2017).

25. “Politicians and public are indignant at any attempts to sanction any Russian entities on the ground they interact with North Korea unless it will be proved by Russian side that they had violated the rules. DPRK is ready to produce agricultural products in the Far East” *Sakha News*, October, 7, 2014, URL. <<http://www.1sn.ru/117962.html>>(date accessed June 10, 2017).
26. <https://slon.ru/posts/57983>.

about 1.5mln tons for the whole of the previous year.²⁷

Traditionally, Russia has also accepted North Korean workers to work at lumber production facilities and in construction, mostly in the Far East. Although criticisms often heard that this is “slave labor” and “workers have to give all their salary to the government,” in fact, it is a highly desirable option for North Korea and it is known that some of the workers bribe officials to get to work in Russia. In 2017, Russia also endured a lot of criticism for opening a ferry line (serviced by the infamous Moranbon ferry) between Rajin and Vladivostok although in fact the project was initiated by the Chinese for carrying Chinese tourists from North-East China to Vladivostok.²⁸ However, this link makes it easier for North Korean workers to get to Russia and also Russian tourists are planned to visit North Korea.

Role of Korea in Russia’s Strategic Partnership with China

After the end of the Cold War, the roles of the two principle allies of DPRK — the former USSR and China — suddenly changed. Newly democratic Russia had neither the resources nor the desire to support the North Korean regime. Beijing, unlike Moscow, had more reasons to be concerned with the situation on the Korean Peninsula, since its geographical proximity and the length of the China-North Korea border (more than 1420 km²⁹) made North Korea crucial for China’s security. According to the bilateral Treaty of Friendship, Cooperation and Mutual Assistance, the DPRK is a military ally of China. It is unlikely that the Chinese leadership believes North Korean forces would pro-

27. RZD logistics “Coal transportation through Rajin Port,” <http://www.rzdlog.ru/services/additional/port_forwarding_rajin/> (accessed on June 10, 2017).

28. “Proposed North Korean ferry to Vladivostok may transport goods and workers” https://www.rbth.com/business/2017/04/19/proposed-north-korean-ferry-to-vladivostok-may-transport-goods-and-workers_746353 (accessed June 9, 2017).

29. Onishi, Norimitsu. Tension, Desperation: The China-North Korean Border *New York Times*, last modified October 22, 2006, URL. <http://www.nytimes.com/2006/10/22/weekinreview/22marsh.html> (date accessed June 10, 2017).

vide meaningful assistance to China in case of war, in fact, their ability to conduct full-scale operations outside the Korean Peninsula is in question. However, the very existence of North Korea gives Chinese borders a certain protection from attack: to attack the North-Eastern provinces of China, any invader would first have to take control over North Korean territory, which is not an easy task, taking into consideration the terrain and the resistance potential of the North Korean army.

The opinion that North Korea is crucial for China's defense capabilities is based not only on theoretical considerations but also on historical experience. During the *Imjin* War Japan viewed an invasion of Korea as the first stage of a military campaign against China, and the latter provided assistance to the Korean Choseon dynasty in order to defeat the aggressors before they could attack Chinese territory.³⁰ On the contrary, at the beginning of the 20th century, Japan managed to occupy the territory of Korea and successfully used it to invade Manchuria. Grave concerns that a defeat of the DPRK would leave Chinese borders vulnerable to a U.S. invasion were one of the main reasons why China, after some hesitation, decided to send its troops to North Korea during the war of 1950-1953.³¹

These considerations are still relevant to China in a situation where South Korea is a U.S. military ally, and American troops and weapons are deployed on its territory. Even now, the U.S.-South Korean alliance and its negative implications for China's security cause deep concerns in China. The U.S. Air Force units, deployed on the Kunsan and Osan air bases have a range which enable them to threaten the territory of China. Even more worrisome for China are the US-based THAAD missile complexes recently deployed in South Korea which, according to the Chinese, can also be used to monitor Chinese territory, including nuclear missile launch sites.³² If the Kore-

30. Denisov, Valery "Inter-Korean Settlement and Russia's Interests." Moscow, *International Affairs*, 2002, No.1, p. 59.

31. Torkunov, A.V., Denisov, V.I. Lee, V.I. F. "Korean Peninsula: Metamorphosis of the Post-War History," (Moscow, Olma Media Grupp 2008. p. 544.

32. Kirianov, Oleg "Military and political aspects of possible U.S. THAAD systems deployment in the Republic of Korea," URL <<https://istina.msu.ru/media/con->

an Peninsula were to be unified under Seoul's guidance, North Korea would become a part of a bigger Republic of Korea (this seems to be the only realistic scenario at the moment), American military bases could appear in the territory of the former DPRK³³, which would be even more dangerous for China than the current military presence of the USA in South Korea. It can be argued that the USA military is stationed in Korea solely for defense purposes and pose no threat to China. However, as the situation with THAAD shows, such reassurances do not work. The Chinese leadership prefers to maintain the current balance of power on the Korean Peninsula, and does not want to rely on the good will of other powers in providing their country's security.

This does not mean that China will always be opposed to the unification of Korea but until Beijing can be sure that unification will not damage its security interests preserving the current regime in Pyongyang will be viewed as a lesser evil. China may even demand the withdrawal of all U.S. forces and the neutral status for the united Korea - something no mainstream politician in Seoul can offer at the moment.

There is one more reason why China cannot completely stop its support for North Korea. A collapse of the current regime in Pyongyang (whether it will be the result of a military defeat or economic crisis) may be followed by flows of refugees to the North-Eastern provinces of China. The border between China and North Korea is almost unprotected, which means it will be no serious obstacle for refugees, and as the North-Eastern provinces are relatively poor by Chinese standards, hundreds of thousands or even millions of North Korean refugees may be a serious blow to their economies.

The abovementioned factors make preserving North Korea as an independent state the best option for China, at least until all their concerns are properly addressed by South Korea and the USA. But that

ferences/conferencepresentation/70a/9da/21772139/Kiriyarov-THAAD-final-VersionVladivostok.pdf>(date accessed June 10, 2017)., p.13.

33. China Wedded to Status Quo on Korean Peninsula" *Chosun Ilbo*, January 4, 2012. URLhttp://english.chosun.com/site/data/html_dir/2012/01/04/2012010401771.html (date accessed June 10, 2017).

does not mean China is willing to support Pyongyang's nuclear and missile programs. In fact, China is one of the most consistent opponents of the North Korean nuclear program.

First, Pyongyang nuclear weapons, under certain circumstances, can be a direct threat to China. The possibility of changing the regime to a more loyal and predictable one must have crossed the minds of Chinese policy makers and the paranoid North Korean leaders might feel or suspect it. The mysterious murder in February 2017 of Kim Jong Nam — a possible (more theoretically, than in reality) pretender, attributed to the North Koreans, may well be explained in these terms, although we believe this was more the North Korean special services' own initiative rather than a direct order from the political leaders. Therefore, China must be increasingly perceived in Pyongyang as an existential threat rather than an ally. Some suggest that its nuclear and missile program, developed by North Korea with such vigor, is meant as a hedge not so much against the United States and South Korea, but China."³⁴

The other problem for Beijing is violations of the nuclear non-proliferation regime. The DPRK is the only country that has ever withdrawn from the NPT, referring to the clause of the treaty authorizing the withdrawal from it in case of a threat to the supreme interests of the country.³⁵ In spite of the fact that these actions, strictly speaking, do not flagrantly violate international law,³⁶ the world community, including China, took these actions with particular concern. The case of the DPRK created a dangerous precedent, which is potentially even

34. "Russia Seizes an Opportunity in North Korea," URL. <<https://worldview.stratfor.com/article/russia-seizes-opportunity-north-korea>>(date accessed June 10, 2017).

35. Diachkov, Ilia "Evolution of North Korea nuclear program in the context of nuclear non-proliferation in the North-East Asia," (Moscow, 2015), URL. http://www.rauk.ru/index.php?option=com_jdownloads&Itemid=4&task=view.download&catid=898&cid=4663&lang=en,(date accessed June 10, 2017). (date accessed June 10, 2017), p. 142 .

36. The Treaty on the non-proliferation of nuclear weapons (NPT), URL. <http://www.un.org/ru/documents/decl_conv/conventions/npt.shtml>(date accessed June 10, 2017).

more dangerous than, for example, actions of Pakistan and India, which were not originally members of the NPT.

The greatest concern of China is the possible reaction of other countries, including two “nuclear threshold states” — the Republic of Korea and Japan. Both countries will have the technical capability to create nuclear weapons within a short time span and although both South Korea and Japan are officially committed to the NPT, the provocative behavior of the DPRK could potentially strengthen the positions of those politicians in Seoul and Tokyo who advocate for the creation of national nuclear forces. China currently has a relatively small nuclear arsenal and is maintaining it at a minimum level sufficient for nuclear deterrence,³⁷ thus further proliferation of nuclear weapons would shift the balance of power within the region, which is very dangerous from China’s perspective.

The other potentially dangerous consequence of the North Korean nuclear program is the increase in U.S. military activity in the region, including the deployment of new types of weapons, such as the above-mentioned THAAD missile defense systems, large-scale military exercises involving thousands of people,³⁸ aircraft carriers, and strategic bombers.³⁹ The permanent stationing of the Carl Vinson aircraft carrier in the waters off the Korean Peninsula may already signify the change in the military balance (for example, it can swiftly be deployed to the South China Sea), which could be detrimental to China.

Thus, China’s policy towards the DPRK can be described as balancing between two different goals. On the one hand, China is interested in preserving the status quo and keeping the state of North Korea in

37. Liping Xia “China’s Nuclear Doctrine: Debates and evolution” *Carnegie Endowment for international peace*, June 30, 2016 URL. <<http://carnegieendowment.org/2016/06/30/china-s-nuclear-doctrine-debates-and-evolution-pub-63967>> (date accessed June 10, 2017).

38. Kiryanov, Oleg “The USA and South Korea started Foal Eagle exercise” *RG.ru*, March 1, 2017, URL. <<https://rg.ru/2017/03/01/ssha-i-iuzhnaia-koreia-nachalnikrupnomasshtabnye-ucheniia-foal-eagle.html>>(date accessed June 10, 2017).

39. Kiryanov, Oleg “The USA and South Korea ships started joint exercise” *RG.ru.*, March 13, 2017, URL. <<https://rg.ru/2017/03/13/korabli-vms-ssha-i-iuzhnoj-korei-vyshli-na-sovmestnye-ucheniia.html>>(date accessed June 10, 2017).

existence, especially to prevent U.S. military intervention. On the other hand, the North Korean regime's internal policies and provocative external behavior cause more and more irritation in China. But China cannot afford to lose the important buffer and see the whole of Korea becoming a sphere of U.S. influence. That would be seen as a major setback in the geopolitical competition, around the same magnitude as the U.S. losing control over Cuba in the early 1960s, which through the Cuban missile crisis almost led to a third World War.

The duality of the current Chinese position is well understood in Russia. Moscow can agree with the main priorities of China: keeping peace while promoting denuclearization. However, Russia is reluctant to join Chinese pressure on Pyongyang – not only because it lacks the relevant leverage, but also out of concern of spoiling relations with Pyongyang, which would damage Moscow's role as a neutral player and peacekeeper. This difference between Russia and China in their attitude towards North Korea became more obvious around 2014 as deterioration of the relations between North Korea and China became pronounced in the wake of execution of the Chang Son-Thaek, who was considered to be one of the closest to China among the North Korean leaders. North Korea then started to display the desire to get closer to Russia, obviously irritating the Chinese. In 2017, this tendency manifested itself in a direct criticism of China by the North Korean press, leaving Russia as the least criticized amongst the major powers involved in Korean affairs.⁴⁰ After Russia increased its economic pres-

40. The criticism could be seen as the answer to the mounting hard feelings in Beijing towards the North Korean leadership, including "severe measures" in sanction policy, while the Chinese press stated, "Pyongyang faces a strategic choice between confrontation to the end at the risk of survival and coming back to the negotiation table by abandoning its nuclear program." A May 4, 2017 editorial of KCNA said such "absurd and reckless remarks" from China's state media were making a bad situation worse and added, "China should no longer try to test the limits of the DPRK's patience... China had better ponder over the grave consequences to be entailed by its reckless act of chopping down the pillar of the DPRK-China relations." "Actions and statements, shattering the pillars of Korea-China relations, should be stopped" / *Rodong Sinmun*, May 4, 2017, URL. <http://web-uridongpo.com/wp/wp-content/uploads/2017/05/rodong_ch

ence in North Korea, China was obviously worried and even sent its first Deputy Foreign Minister to Russia solely, for the first time in modern history, to discuss Korean issues. Later, permanent deputy-minister level strategic dialogue was initiated.

However, the differences between the positions of the two powers were marginal until the middle of 2016. This allowed Moscow to delegate the mission of discussing the North Korean problem with USA to China, and Moscow usually undersigned the agreement Beijing reached with Washington.

The situation after the fifth nuclear test showed that the differences in the two powers' interest and approaches were underestimated. Initially the positions of the two powers looked very close. Reacting to the fifth nuclear test, in February 2016 Russia voiced "strong protest" and warned about an "increase in tensions" and danger of a "block policy" and an "increase in military confrontation."⁴¹ The Chinese reaction was similar; however, it additionally demanded "strong actions [that] should have a definite direction with the objective of effectively curbing the DPRK's efforts to advance its nuclear and missile program."

This nuance happened to be more important than it might seem. The adoption of UNSC Resolution 2270 in response to the North Korean nuclear and missile tests of January-February was a watershed for China, who agreed to unprecedentedly hard sanctions. Not expecting major changes in Chinese policy, Russia as usual delegated the negotiations on the content of the Resolution to China and was amazed by unexpected Chinese agreement to launch harsher sanctions including limitations on raw materials exports and transportation through North Korean territory. Moreover, such sanctions directly affected Russia's own interests, since Russia's main economic interests in the DPRK were precisely in the rare earth and non-ferrous metals, as well as iron,

170504.html> (date accessed June 10, 2017).

41. "Russian Foreign ministry has prepared an executive order to adapt stricter sanctions against DPRK, *Riafan.ru*, February 20, 2017, URL. <<https://riafan.ru/624662-mid-rf-podgotovil-ukaz-ob-uzhestochenii-sankcii-protiv-kndr>>(date accessed June 10, 2017).

targeted by the new resolution. Moscow was given only 24 hours to approve the draft, which was not enough to thoroughly analyze the consequences, suggest its amendments, and approve a balanced decision.⁴²

There is also a difference in Chinese and Russian perceptions of the negotiation process on the North Korean nuclear program. The two parties hold regular channels of communications on the Korean situation and try to coordinate their policy responses. However, the Chinese position that the “focus of the Peninsula nuclear issue is on the U.S. and the DPRK” is taken warily by Russia which stresses the multi-lateral format.⁴³ At the same time, Russia publicly supports Chinese suggestions on “double suspension” and “parallel progress,”⁴⁴ naming them “a possible starting point for getting out of the impasse and restart of diplomatic process.”⁴⁵

The differences between Beijing and Moscow are not limited to the issue of sanctions against Pyongyang. The late 2016–early 2017 events showed some dichotomy in the two countries’ approaches to other issues, such as THAAD deployment. Russia’s “grave concern” was explained publicly by the danger that this U.S. action “leads to an increase in the potential of Asia-Pacific segment of [US] global missile defense, which results in undermining the existing strategic balances...” paying most attention to the Russia-U.S. strategic balance

42. Toloraya, Georgy “UNSCR 2270: A Conundrum for Russia,” March 5, 2016, *NK Info*, URL. <<http://38north.org/2016/03/gtoloraya030516/>>(date accessed June 10, 2017).

43. Foreign Ministry Spokesperson Hong Lei’s Regular Press Conference on February 15, 2016, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the People’s Republic of China, URL. <http://www.fmprc.gov.cn/mfa_eng/xwfw_665399/s2510_665401/2511_665403/t1340636.shtml>(date accessed June 10, 2017).

44. “China’s man on North Korea crisis cools heels in Beijing,” April 18, 2017, *Reuters*, URL. <http://www.reuters.com/article/us-northkorea-usa-china-wu-id USKBzN17K0GS>(date accessed June 10, 2017).

45. Press-statement of Deputy Foreign Minister of the Russian Federation Gatilov G.M. on the situation on the Korean Peninsula at the open session of the UN Security Council. April 28, 2017 URL. <http://www.mid.ru/web/guest/maps/kp/-/asset_publisher/VJy7Ig5QaAII/content/id/2740121>(date accessed June 10, 2017).

issue.⁴⁶ China showed more concern about the direct consequences of the deployment, stating that it “damage[s] China’s strategic security interests” as “monitoring range of its X-band radar, goes far beyond the defense need of the Korean Peninsula and will reach deep into the Asian hinterland.”⁴⁷

Considering these differences, it is safe to say that the priorities of China and Russia became more nuanced, although not contradicting each other. This is not an obstacle to effective cooperation between the two partners, but in order to protect its national interest, Russia may have to play a more active role in solving security issues around the Korean Peninsula. The triangular relations with the new South Korean government are also of growing importance so that the partners should not be played against one another.

Russia-U.S. Convergence and Divergence of Interests over North Korea

North Korean nuclear and missile programs remain at the center of Russia-U.S. dialogue on the Korean Peninsula on all levels from heads of states down to daily diplomatic contacts and Track 2 discussions.⁴⁸ It is also one of the few of international policy problems where the U.S. and Russia cooperate.⁴⁹

The current challenges to Russia in its dealings with the USA on Korean policy are serious. The situation around North Korea started to change after Donald Trump became the president of the USA and his

46. Statement of Deputy Foreign Minister of the Russian Federation on the UN Security Council open meeting on the situation on the Korean Peninsula, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Russian Federation. April 28, 2017 URL. <http://www.mid.ru/web/guest/maps/kp/-/asset_publisher/VJy7lg5QaAII/content/id/2740121> (date accessed June 10, 2017).

47. Foreign Ministry Spokesperson Hong Lei’s Regular Press Conference.

48. Telephone call with the president of the USA Donald Trump,” URL./<http://kremlin.ru/events/president/news/54441>(date accessed June 10, 2017).

49. “Valdai discussion club session,” *Kremlin.ru*, October 24, 2014, URL. www.kremlin.ru/news/46860(date accessed June 10, 2017).

administration officially declared the end of “strategic patience” toward North Korea.⁵⁰ Perhaps, Trump’s personal thinking as well as his desire to project the image of a stronger and more competent leader than his predecessor, contributed to this decision. However, there was a more pragmatic reason to abandon the “strategic patience” policy — it did not only prove to be ineffective, but also had negative implications on the situation in Korea. Pyongyang, on the one hand, could not hope that dialogue with the current American administration would help to address its security concerns. On the other hand, it successfully used the time-out in the negotiation process to make a leap forward in its nuclear and missile programs. Willing to find a way out of this stalemate, Trump declared a new strategy toward North Korea, which, in fact, looks not so different from the one of the previous administration, except for excessive use of threats, which led to an unprecedented escalation of tensions between North Korea and the USA.

On the one hand, Moscow and Washington refer to the issue differently: Russia prefers the term “Nuclear problem of the Korean Peninsula” implying South Korean territory should also be included in any deal. On the other hand, Russia and the USA share a desire to denuclearize North Korea. Both generally agree that this should be achieved on a multilateral basis, although they might understand “multilateralism” differently (the USA as the acquisition of support of all the regional actors for their vision of denuclearization, while Russia as a compromise-based solution, taking into account the legitimate interests of all the parties including the DPRK).

However, the contradictions are numerous.

- The USA is eager to use “all options” to curtail the missile and nuclear program. Russia insists that only political-diplomatic tools are permissible.
- The USA believes that sanctions and isolation may force North Korean leaders to succumb to pressure and agree to denuclearization. Russia

50. “Tillerson Says Strategic Patience Has Failed With Iran, North Korea,” *Voice of America*, April 19, 2017, URL. <https://www.voanews.com/a/trump-orders-review-of-iran-nuclear-deal/3816362.html>(date accessed June 10, 2017).

is skeptical about a view that sanctions alone can change North Korea's behavior and is against seeing them as an end in itself. However, recently Russia, under U.S. pressure, started to recognize the possibility to use sanctions but only under the condition that they are combined with dialogue and engagement.

- The USA proceeded from the probability of the collapse of the North Korean regime and occupation of North Korea by the South. Russia, admitting the possibility of an emergency or a calamity of some kind, evaluated the regime as stable and warned that the strategy should not be based on the "regime change" concept or on the presumption it is possible to ignore the current regime.
- The USA in general demands CVID (complete, verifiable, and irreversible denuclearization) as a prerequisite for dialogue or a compromise. Russia believes the discussion on North Korean security modalities should be simultaneous with negotiations on the nuclear issue. Also, the nuclear freeze and moratorium on both sides, declined by the USA for years, is seen by Russia as a starting point for serious discussions. Russia in general supports the idea of a direct peace treaty between Washington and Pyongyang combined with multilateral guarantees.
- The U.S. "political class" is in general skeptical of formally recognizing the DPRK, seeing it a "rogue regime" causing many concerns apart from the nuclear problem such as other WMDs, human rights, etc. Russia thinks that recognizing a state existing for 70+ years and a UN member is a normal step toward the creation of a system of collective security in North-East Asia.

One of the first contacts of the Kremlin with the new U.S. administration on foreign policy issues was with the special representative on North Korea policy, Joseph Yun, visiting Moscow in April 2017. However, it left a sore feeling as he stressed the need for increases in sanctions and stated that the installation of the American missile defense system in Asia was a key step in halting North Korea's security provocations.⁵¹ The Russian hosts were lukewarm to such approaches seeing political and diplomatic means as the only method to ease the Korean

51. The USA vows to protect its allies from North Korean threat," *Voice of America*, April 5, 2017, URL: <http://www.golos-ameriki.ru/a/ron-kb-north-korea-talk/3797711.html>(date accessed June 10, 2017).

situation. It is also noteworthy that the White House tried to solicit Russia's support on pressuring North Korea in the wake of a new ballistic missile test in May 2017, by stating the missile fell closer to Russia than to Japan (which was later denied by the Russia Ministry of Defense)⁵² and thus, Russia "was not pleased," implying Russia should take measures.⁵³ The sanction measures against Russian companies and individuals dealing with North Korea provoked strong protests from Russia's side.

Despite these examples of dichotomy seemingly separating the two countries, the uncertainties of the Trump era do present both grave challenges and opportunities.

For example, the "Trump-Kim" standoff in the spring of 2017 caught Russian policymakers off guard. Despite being used to "spring recurrence" of hostilities in Korea, this saber rattling was largely unexpected. According to Russian analysis there is little logic in what was happening in April 2017 and that is why:

- In the initial period of the Trump administration North Korea exercised a relative restraint, if compared to the similar periods of previous years.
- Trump's choice of the notoriously insolvable Korean problem as a testing stone for his foreign policy was largely inexplicable, and may only have been for PR purposes.
- If the whole exercise was meant just to preempt another North Korean nuclear and/or missile test and to "warn" Kim Jong Un, that's a costly way of doing business in many senses of the word. It might make Pyongyang and Beijing more receptive, but putting the world on a brink of nuclear catastrophe is not a sign of responsible policy.⁵⁴

52. Russia reacts to the fall of North Korean missile near its borders," *Segodnya*, May 14, 2017, URL. <http://www.segodnya.ua/world/v-rf-otreagirovali-na-padenie-rakety-kndr-vblizi-svoih-granic-1020650.html> (date accessed June 10, 2017).

53. "The USA believes that Russia is disappointed by the latest North Korea missile launch" *versia.ru*, May 14, 2017, URL. <https://versia.ru/ssha-uvereniy-cto-rossiyu-razocharoval-ocherednoj-pusk-severokorejskoj-rakety>(date accessed June 10, 2017).

54. One U.S. observer noted: "In the business world familiar to Trump, brinkmanship, psychological warfare, and unpredictability are tactics used to elicit cooper-

- Trump's actions might be read as an attempt to strengthen the future negotiation positions to derive maximum concessions from the opposing party in future bargaining,⁵⁵ but this is close to adventurism.
- Another possible goal is to "show China" its "real" place in world politics and confirm the U.S.'s leadership. In that case, such bluff tactics find no understanding with Russian policymakers.

Russia was critical of the U.S.'s practical actions against North Korea such as sending an aircraft carrier group, etc. and published several critical official statements.⁵⁶ While the possibility of a new Korean War was widely discussed publicly, with most of observers being critical of U.S. measures.⁵⁷

Russian political circles and the public were also enraged by the reports that the U.S. Congress suggested the "control" of foreign ports, including some Russian Far Eastern ports, to check how the sanctions against DPRK were being implemented. Politicians called it "equal to a

ation. Keeping one's cards close is typical behavior of business tycoons. Trump, who thrives on the element of surprise, is no exception. In international politics, however, threatening words can box an administration in. If its warnings are merely rhetorical and not credible, they could embolden Pyongyang. On the other hand, credible warnings managed improperly could potentially lead to an undesired, disastrous scenario." Kim, Duyeon "What the South Korean Election Means for Trump: How Washington Can Work With the Next Administration," *Foreignaffairs.com*, May 8, 2017 URL <https://www./articles/2017-05-08/what-south-korean-election-means-trump> (date accessed June 10, 2017).

55. They say the U.S. made four promises to the regime: It will not pursue regime change in North Korea; it will not remove Kim Jong Un; it will not invade North Korea; and it will not rush Korean reunification. However, these were in fact the promises made during the Clinton years. "U.S. could leave Kim in place if Pyongyang scraps nukes," *Nikkei Asian Review*, May 9, 2017, URL. <http://asia.nikkei.com/Politics-Economy/International-Relations/US-offers-to-leave-Kim-in-place-if-Pyongyang-scraps-nukes>(date accessed June 10, 2017).
56. "Carl Vinson's raid increases the possibility of a <occational> start of the war with Korea," *Marketsignal.ru* April 10, 2017 URL. <http://marketsignal.ru/2017/04/10/rejd-karla-vinsona-povyshaet-risk-sluchajnogo-nachala-vojny-s-koreej/> (date accessed June 10, 2017).
57. "Expert on Pence's statement: The USA determination to use force against DPRK is a bluff" *RIA.ru*, May 17, 2017, URL. https://ria.ru/radio_brief/20170417/1492388521.html(date accessed June 10, 2017).

declaration of war"⁵⁸ and there is now little chance Russia will be cooperative on "secondary sanctions" advocated by the United States.

The demands to drastically reduce the number of North Korean workers in the Far East were also received in a lukewarm manner. Russia believes that the foreign exchange earned by these individuals is an important asset to improve the lives of their families and a chance to get educated in foreign setting, rather than a channel for financing the North Korean nuclear and missile program. The Russian press was irritated by hostile comments about Russia-North Korea ties, such as the opening of a ferry travel route between Vladivostok and Rajin, as this is one of the few ways to allow passengers and goods to be transported.⁵⁹ In fact, the project was said to be initiated by the Chinese to transport Chinese tourists to Russia. As a result, popular support for not reacting to the U.S. and Japanese pressure on the issue of ties with North Korea has increased.

However, Russia is still expressing its readiness to assist any diplomatic efforts between the U.S. and North Korea to find a compromise and could cooperate with Washington to that end. It is reassuring that the secret channels of contact and negotiations between Washington and Pyongyang have functioned even before the start of Trump administration — as reported by *the Wall Street Journal* "for more than a year, American diplomats have held secret talks in Pyongyang and European cities with North Korea's top nuclear negotiator, Choi Sun Hee, hoping to free U.S. prisoners and even establish a diplomatic channel to constrain North Korea's nuclear and missile ambitions."⁶⁰

58. "It is equal to declaration of war: Moscow accessed the USA plans to take control over Far East ports," *RIA.ru*, May 5, 2017, URL. <https://ria.ru/world/20170505/1493736236.html> (date accessed June 10, 2017).

59. "The launch of direct communication between Vladivostok and Rason can be a case for war," *Zrpress.ru* May 6, 2017, URL. http://www.zrpress.ru/incidents/dalnij-vostok_06.05.2017_83409_nachalo-raboty-paromnoj-linii-vladivostok--rason-mozhet-stat-povodom-dlja-vojny.html (date accessed June 10, 2017).

60. "Top North Korean Nuclear Negotiator Secretly Met With U.S. Diplomats" — *The Wall Street Journal*, June 18, 2017 <https://www.wsj.com/amp/articles/top-north-korean-nuclear-negotiator-secretly-met-with-u-s-diplomats-1497783603?responsive=y&tesla=y>, (date accessed June 19, 2017).

Russia-ROK Security Cooperation in the Moon Era

Russia does support Korean unification in the form of the peaceful emergence of a friendly neutral state which could be an important “balancer” of Russia’s North-East Asian politics, dominated now by China and Japan. However, no other scenario but occupation of the North by the South is imaginable at the moment. Today the new geopolitical situation — including the standoff between the U.S. and Russia, as well as the rivalry between the U.S. and China, gives little hope for the possibility that the North Korean state can be brought down peacefully in a “soft landing” scenario and its territory taken by one of the competing “camps” in a serene manner. It would also result in a sudden shift in the balance of power in the Far East, revisioning the results of the Second World War, upon which the global system has been based for over 70 years, and a possible change for the worse regarding the security surroundings of China. This would be detrimental to Russia’s interests. A unified Korea, even with the unlikely event of a U.S. troop withdrawal, would still remain an ally of the United States and one with much more power (for example, territorial claims to China and even Russia cannot be excluded).

The above considerations do not mean that Russia supports a “perpetuation” of the division of the peninsula and hostilities between the two Korea and would not like to see a change in North Korea. On the contrary, it is working on reducing tensions and promoting peaceful dialogue, cooperation, and eventual reconciliation between the two Koreas. Russia is trying especially hard to promote the “Trilateral” projects.⁶¹ In the distant future that process might lead to economic integration and the creation of a unified state, passing

61. Potential three-party projects attracting South Korean investment into North Korea via Russia are the most promising venture. They can bring much-needed financing, provide markets for Russia and North Korea in the South, and vice versa. Such projects are also important geopolitically and geoeconomically for promoting regional peace and cooperation in Northeast Asia. They are seen both as a source of mutual prosperity and as a tool to help the North Korean economy modernize, as well as a way to build mutual trust and improve the political atmosphere.

through a number of stages. Russia hopes such a state would be neutral and not hostile to Russia. At the moment, Russia deems it desirable to preserve both countries' statehoods while promoting change in North Korea. To start this process, Russia believes North Korea should have security guarantees for the existing regime, however bizarre and unpleasant it is.

The advent of the new liberal administration in Seoul can help turn the page from the unfortunate era of serious Russia-ROK disagreements and lack of cooperation on the North Korean issue. The main reason for this was Park's strategy towards the North Korean nuclear problem, which was, in fact, similar to Obama's "strategic patience" policy and made the start of denuclearization a pre-condition for any dialogue with Pyongyang. President Park probably had some reasons to take a harder stance towards North Korea. The "Sunshine Policy" of her predecessors Kim Dae Jung and Roh Moo Hyun, despite some achievements, such as promoting economic cooperation between the North and the South, still failed to achieve denuclearization on the Korean Peninsula. However, continuous pressure on Pyongyang was also not able to persuade Pyongyang to abandon its nuclear program, since North Korean leadership sees it as the only way to ensure its own survival and is ready to endure economic losses in order to preserve it.⁶²

Moreover, putting forward this condition made it impossible for Seoul to continue any meaningful dialogue with North Korea, including a multilateral format, thus making Russia-ROK cooperation on the North Korean issue, including trilateral economic projects, just a formality. Whether dictated by the underestimation of Pyongyang's endurance, based on wishful thinking, disappointment in the "Sunshine Policy" or both, President Park's strategy of pressure on North Korea failed to achieve any tangible results, but led to further tensions and growing isolation between the North and the South.

Paradoxically, analyzing the current developments we can con-

62. Zhebin, Alexander "Some Aspects of Korea's Nuclear Crisis," in *Russia and Korea in the Changing World Order*, edited by V. Tkachenko (Moscow, 2003), p. 48.

clude that, despite the potential danger, the situation around the Korean problem has moved out of a stalemate and acquired some dynamic, differences from the “strategic patience” era, and thus, can even lay a basis for future dialogue. Whether this opportunity for dialogue will be used depends on the stakeholders, including South Korea. Russia is watching President’s Moon advances closely. At the moment, the position of the new Korean leader gives some grounds for optimism. Moon Jae In admits that “strategic patience” was a “failure”⁶³ however, unlike Trump, he does not limit his options in inter-Korean relations to only pressure on Pyongyang. During his election campaign, Moon has publically expressed his commitment to dialogue with the North, re-establishing economic relations and even mentioned the possibility of an inter-Korean summit.⁶⁴ He also said that the ultimate purpose of sanctions “must be to bring North Korea back to the negotiating table,”⁶⁵ which fully corresponds with the position of Moscow, which sees sanctions as one of the possible tools to stimulate dialogue but does not believe they are enough to solve the North Korean nuclear problem.

During the TV debates, Moon also mentioned that multilateral diplomacy is the key to denuclearization as well as a means to achieve peace and economic cooperation,⁶⁶ which also seems pretty close to the Russian approach. It is worth mentioning that Russia is also interested

63. Noland, Marcus and Boydston, Kent, “President Moon Jae-in and Sunshine Policy 3.0” *PIIE*, May 9, 2017, URL. <https://piie.com/blogs/north-korea-witness-transformation/president-moon-jae-and-sunshine-policy-30>(date accessed June 10, 2017).

64. Kim, Ga-Young “Experts forecast Moon’s North Korea policy,” *Daily NK*, May 16, 2017, URL. <http://www.dailynk.com/english/read.php?num=14516&catald=nk00400> (date accessed June 10, 2017).

65. Choe Sang-Hun, “South Korea Elects Moon Jae-in, Who Backs Talks With North, as President” *New York Times*, May 9, 2017, URL. <https://www.nytimes.com/2017/05/09/world/asia/south-korea-election-president-moon-jae-in.html> (date accessed June 10, 2017).

66. Boykoff, Pamela and Griffiths, James, “South Korea’s new president wants to reverse its North Korea policy,” *CNN*, May 10, 2017, URL. <http://edition.cnn.com/2017/05/09/asia/south-korea-president-moon-north-korea/>(date accessed June 10, 2017).

in re-starting economic cooperation between the North and the South, since, until the current crises in the inter-Korean relations, Russia had been an active participant and beneficiary of the tri-lateral economic projects on the Korean Peninsula.

The summary of Moon's conceptual approaches emphasizes the need to:

- Re-establish inter-Korean relations
- Put a priority on economic integration (one market) and seeking step-by-step unification
- Establish a new Korean Peninsula economic belt when the North Korean nuclear issue is resolved
- Sign a Basic Inter-Korean Agreement for new inter-Korean relations
- Pursue the improvement of human rights in the North and the settlement of issues involving inter-Korean separated families and South Korean POWs and abductees
- Bolster inter-Korean media, social, cultural, and sports exchanges
- Launch an inter-Korean joint border management committee and strengthen the support of North Korean defectors

The need for diplomatic solutions is also stressed as the stated methods to reach denuclearization include:

- Make use of a variety of bilateral and multilateral talks, including six-party talks
- Prevent accidental inter-Korean military clashes and ease military tensions

President Moon's envoy to Russia, Sung Yong Gil, after talks with President Putin in May admitted in an interview with the Russian press that Russia was unsatisfied with the former South Korean government's "NATO policy" — "No Actions, Talk Only" but now the situation is to change as the present government will consider the Russian factor more. Seoul will concentrate on practical problems, including a possible gas pipeline, an "energy ring" in North-East Asia, the Khasan-Rajin project, cooperation in the Siberia and Maritime areas, agriculture, shipbuilding,

the Arctic maritime way, etc. He also supported the idea of a temporary freeze on North Korean nuclear and missile programs in exchange for a freeze or relocation of U.S.-South Korea military exercises, shared by Russia. Mr. Sung also suggested the creation of a special government structure promoting Russia- ROK relations.⁶⁷

This approach corresponds with Russia's understanding of what future developments on the Korean Peninsula should look like. It is noteworthy that such an approach, "Moon Jae In's doctrine," states the need to "Develop strategic economic cooperation via Seoul-Pyongyang-Moscow cooperation in parallel with the progress in the settlement of the North Korea nuclear issue."⁶⁸

Of course, it would be too optimistic to expect cooperation between the North and the South to achieve the level of the "Sunshine Policy" during the current presidential cycle. In addition to the legacy of the Park era, there are also limitations, created by international sanctions against the DPRK. Strict commitment to the sanctions may limit South Korea's options, while lifting them could be viewed negatively by the USA and would affect China's willingness to put pressure on its ally,⁶⁹ and Russia understands this. Still, even limited recovering of economic ties would play a positive role in building trust between the ROK and the DPRK. It would be naïve to expect that Russia would act, or even be forced to act, in support of a U.S.-led line to pressure North Korea into concessions and weaken the regime. Nor would it support any military blackmail or threats to use force by any of the parties. Russia would act based on its clear understanding of the need to preserve stability and predictability at its borders, therefore it cannot risk breaking this stability by cornering the regime.

67. Kirianov, Oleg Russia has a chance for solving the North Korean problem Rg.ru URL. <https://rg.ru/2017/06/09/iuzhnaia-koreia-rossia-eto-shans-dlia-resheniia-severokorejskoj-problemy.html> (date accessed June 13, 2017).

68. Analysis of Washington-based experts.

69. Noland, Marcus and Boydston, Kent, "President Moon Jae-in and Sunshine Policy 3.0" *PIIE*, May 9, 2017, URL <https://piie.com/blogs/north-korea-witness-transformation/president-moon-jae-and-sunshine-policy-30>(date accessed June 10, 2017)."

Therefore, the line for dialogue and political means of solving the contradictions will remain the basis for Russian policy. To be successful, the support of the U.S. and South Korea should be enlisted. The constructive role of the new ROK government could be a game-changer. If the North and the South are ready for a meaningful dialogue, Moscow can make its contribution to the process. Russia hopes that the new president's position will be more constructive and realistic. The North Korean nuclear program should not be tolerated; however, it would be unrealistic to demand denuclearization as a pre-condition for cooperation. On the contrary, building mutual trust and a de-escalation of tensions are absolutely necessary for establishing conditions for a dialogue. Pressuring Pyongyang without addressing its security concerns would be harmful, strengthening Kim Jong Un's belief that a nuclear deterrent is mandatory for the survival of his regime.

Should Russia and South Korea find a common understanding on this point it would be easier to discuss such a concept with the principal actors - the DPRK and USA. Using its political contacts with Washington and Pyongyang, Russia may try to prove this point and help restart direct U.S.-DPRK dialogue. South Korea should not oppose such a line. Some signs, such as the idea of sending a special Russian presidential envoy to Pyongyang, floated by President Moon's envoy, Sung Young Gil, during the talks with Putin suggest that Seoul understands the importance of Russia's possible brokerage. Mr. Sung also suggested that Russia can play a more active role in solving the nuclear issue given Kim Jong Un's strained relations with the Chinese leader. President Putin can then act as broker for improving Pyongyang's relations with Seoul, Beijing, and Washington.⁷⁰ The Russia-U.S. contacts, including summit ones, can also do much to explain the options and chances to the U.S. government.

If such initial diplomatic progress is going to be successful, Russia will probably stick to the line that the only acceptable option is finding the final solution to the Korean issue within the multiparty diplomatic

70. Kirianov, Oleg Russia has a chance for solving the North Korean problem Rg.ru URL. <https://rg.ru/2017/06/09/iuzhnaia-koreia-rossiia-eto-shans-dlia-resheniia-severokorejskoj-problemy.html> (date accessed June 13, 2017).

process. Russia would prefer a balanced solution, which would take into account the lawful interests of all actors. The tendency of a regional Cold War era-like division on Korean affairs (3+3) should be arrested. Rather “a concert of powers” is attractive. It could be formed on the basis of the multi-party mechanism of talks, which has already proved its usefulness, although proven to be unsuccessful due to limiting the agenda only to the nuclear issue without properly addressing North Korean concerns. It is worth mentioning that the new roadmap on denuclearization and peace process on the Korean Peninsula, suggested by Russian Deputy Foreign Minister Igor Morgulov on June 27, emphasizes the necessity of creating a long-lasting multilateral peace mechanism in the region. Russia believes that the necessary conditions for North Korean denuclearization and stability on the Korean Peninsula will be created only when all the countries of North East Asia “feel equally safe.”⁷¹

In practice, a diplomatic process should start with direct U.S.-North Korea talks on these new modalities. In parallel, North-South dialogue on restoring cooperation and healing the wounds of the previous decade, dismantling the pitiful heritage of conservative era should be initiated by the new South Korean government. However, in order not to be rejected, such an initiative should not mention the nuclear issue. This is the agenda for multiparty discussions, as the ROK is not in a position to provide any security guarantees for the DPRK.

Also, a general discussion on the possible mechanism of the talks and principles of peace and cooperation in North-East Asia can be conducted in the relevant working group of the former Six-party talks (headed by Russia). It could be reestablished as an organizing bureau or secretariat of the future multiparty talks.

If such preliminary steps prove successful, the formal process may be jumpstarted by a symbolic meeting of the foreign ministers of the six countries plus plenipotentiary representatives of the UN and IAEA on the sidelines of the UN General Assembly in September, possibly in

71. Russia Drafts, Ready to Discuss With Partners North Korea Roadmap Sputniknews.com URL <https://sputniknews.com/politics/201706271054999083-north-korea-roadmap-draft/> (date accessed June 27, 2017).

the presence of the national leaders, fantastic as it sounds. The first issue on the agenda of the talks should be the voluntary freeze of the North Korean nuclear program for the duration of the talks in exchange for easing sanctions.

Of course, such suggestions are highly speculative.⁷² However, the political and diplomatic solutions advocated by Russia are not impossible. The single condition is that the adversaries should face reality and rely on hard facts. The U.S. and South Korea should come to terms with the existence of North Korea and pursue a policy of coexistence rather than undermining the “dreadful” regime. South Korea should abandon its dreams of unification by absorption and learn to live with a difficult neighbor, providing the attitude of a mature and developed country. North Korea should admit that there will never be peace and prosperity in North Korea unless it abandons its nuclear weapons program (provided a new security regime will be set first). Then other regional players (China, Russia, and Japan) could play the constructive role in bridging the gaps, based on the simple fact that a war in Korea would benefit no one.

Of course, neither political negotiations nor economic cooperation will achieve the denuclearization of North Korea immediately. In fact, the process will require careful planning and a harmonizing of the interests of all the players. However, there is no viable alternative to this process, and it is up to South Korea whether the current situation will lead to a new stalemate or to a constructive dialogue. If Seoul chooses the latter, Moscow is going to be a valuable partner.

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72. See in more detail: 한반도에평화복원하기: 러시아의시각에서-게오르기톨로라야(루스키미르재단소장) http://www.keaf.org/book/EAF_Policy_Debate_Restoring_Peace_on_the_Korean_Peninsula:_A_Russian_Perspective_kr?ckattemp=1 (accessed on June 13, 2017).

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